

What Caused the German Revolution of November, 1918?

By PROF. VON SCHULZE-GAEVERNITZ

UNIVERSITY OF FREIBURG
MEMBER OF THE GERMAN REICHSTAG
LEADER OF THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY

IT HAS been said of the German Revolution of November, 1918, that it was an untimely overthrow of the government and that it came both too late and too early: too late because the popular state had already been founded under Prince Max and was secure beyond all doubt; too early because the work of securing peace had just begun and much depended upon keeping alive in our opponents the conviction that the military conquest of Germany and the forcing back of the German armies to the Meuse and the Rhine could be accomplished only at the cost of great sacrifice, and that therefore the much desired peace would have to be a just peace of reconciliation. Those who emphasized this viewpoint say the Revolution disarmed Germany in a one-sided way and delivered it helpless to the good graces, or possibly the bad graces, of its enemies. Some have added that the mortal thrust of a dagger came from the homeland into the back of the army that was standing at the front. This dagger was sharpened abroad and was transmitted by the Independent Socialists into the hands of the masses in the industrial centers at home. A considerable rôle was played by Russian money and arms. Enemy aviators used tons of revolutionary leaflets to bombard our positions and a very skilfully led propaganda smuggled in from neutral countries bales of printed matter that helped undermine the morale.

Looked at in this way, the Revolution appears as a masterpiece of propaganda by skilful foreign leaders who kept themselves in the background, the only doubtful side of which is the question, how the spirits that they called to their aid are to be gotten rid of.

However interesting the question of foreign financing of this Revolution, as of every revolution, may be, other considerations are of deeper significance. External incitement alone does not make a revolution. Every revolution is rooted in the last instance in the sins and callous obtuseness of those against whom it directs itself. This fact has been established by the world's history. Our old system was rotten. The belief of our people in it had gone. "Swindle" was the word that one heard from a hundred thousand tongues at the front and at home during the last year of the war to designate the system of government. In the crisis the outlived fell to the ground like over-ripe fruit at the lightest touch. After so much ostentation and so many grandiloquent words, the lack of resistance with which the old system went out seemed ridiculous and shameful.

Looked at in this way, the Revolution of November, 1918, was a historical necessity out of which GERMAN FREEDOM can and should be born. The impulse to it, as is well known, came from the fleet which stood for four years under constant "four-hour readiness and half steam" and which succumbed in its morale to a four-year blockade. The opinion, whether correct or false, of many sailors with whom I talked is that the revolution in the fleet was started to ward off a trip "for the purpose of an honorable destruction." Like wildfire the sailors spread the revolution from Kiel to Wilhelmshafen, Hamburg, Hanover, South Germany and elsewhere. What a catastrophe! The grand battle fleet was largely the achievement of the kaiser. By long inaction, accompanied by constant irksome service, it had become demoralized during the war so that this fleet became the nursery of the revolution which overthrew its chief builder, the kaiser. But possibly even after these waves of opposition had started, the task of smoothing them out which had been undertaken by Representatives Noske and Haussmann might have succeeded. While they were at work with the fleet other members of the Reichstag visited the army front during those days in order to build up the morale.

The decisive action, however, which brought on the revolution, took place in Berlin over the kaiser question. In a caucus session of the Reichstag on Wednesday, the 9th of November, as the spokesman for my party, I demanded the immediate abdication of the kaiser. Such an abdication might have saved the monarchical forms and preserved the government of Prince Max of Baden, with which even the Social Democrats would have been satisfied. The imperial crown was to pass to the twelve-year-old nephew who was still young enough so that a modern and sensible education could have been provided for him and a parliamentary regency instituted subordinate to the constitution.

THE most important reason which made the abdication of the kaiser inevitable was the express demand of President Wilson. In addition to this it was necessary to respect the demands of the broad Social Democratic masses of workers. In any case, we all knew that either without or against the Social Democrats no government could be established as the affiliated trades unions were the only firm bulwark against the chaos which was pressing upon us from the East. Most unfortunately, the kaiser withdrew himself during those days from the influence of the civil government and had his attitude stiffened by the generals at army headquarters. To the ultimatum of the Social Democrats of November 7, which demanded his abdication within twenty-four hours, there came on November 8 the answer of the kaiser that he would yield only to force. Actually at this time another promising effort to bring about his abdication was under way.

Without waiting for the result of this effort, on the morning of November 9 a general strike broke out in Berlin. This strike was the most bloodless of all revolutions, and in a few hours crumbled the old system into a heap—the united defection of the Berlin

garrison to the Revolution! In the afternoon before three o'clock Scheidemann announced the German Republic from the steps of the Reichstag building, and shortly thereafter Liebknecht made a speech from the balcony of the Imperial Palace at which one of the kaiser's crimson bedcovers served as a red flag. The first shots were not heard until evening around the castle and the imperial stables which were defended by a group of unfortunate young soldiers. All military order was dissolved. Soldiers and civilians rushed through the streets with machine guns. Cartridges for infantry rifles were passed from hand to hand like pieces of candy. On the same afternoon the red guard appeared in the hallways of the Reichstag and pushed the representatives to one side. I heard with my own ears how a courier of Scheidemann, who asked one of the red guards to allow him to pass, received the answer: "Scheidemann can go hang."

The removal of the government of Prince Max was followed on the 10th of November by the formation of a new government under Ebert and Haase. All bourgeois parties were excluded. Although the Independent Socialists had received only a minority of votes, they got in the formation of the government equal representation with the majority Socialists. This was the first capitulation of the Socialists to the Independents, which was followed by the others. On the same day the Revolution completed itself step by step, especially in Belgium. In all parts of Germany councils of soldiers formed to seize control of affairs, and in many cases they at least had this merit, that they kept in force the elementary basis of civil order.

Only a few hours after the overthrow of the government the armistice conditions, the most terrible in the world's history, were announced. The acceptance of these conditions equivalent to a one-sided disarmament, the delivery of our means of transportation and of the fleet, which had been our pride, with the continuation of the hunger blockade, was described by Fehrenbach, the President of the Reichstag, in the following words:

"On the 10th of November came the 'famous' Sunday on which the conditions of peace were to be transmitted to us. In addition to the Imperial Chancellor, Ebert, and his secretaries of state, Landsberg and Scheidemann, the officials of the old government, and I were together in the Chancellor's house. Ebert emphasized in a few words that he would omit the customary words of greeting, which in this hour were out of place. The Foreign Secretary of State, Dr. Solf, read the conditions. You can imagine with what feelings they were listened to. Then the telegram of the Armistice Commission which had been named by the old government, was read, in which the Commission notified us that nothing remained but to accept these conditions. After that a telegram was ready from Hindenburg in which he asked that the conditions be accepted immediately. He stated that he could not hold the army together any longer. Then Ebert asked, 'Who is against accepting?' A terrible silence followed."

I traveled during these critical days from Berlin to Mannheim in terribly crowded wagons and railway cars with tens of thousands of soldiers in uniform that were hastening home. It was most interesting to get an impression of their state of mind. In terrible brevity one of these soldiers in uniform summed up the prevailing feeling into these words:

"Victory would have been a lash for us." Another added, "Yes, behind every three Germans there would have been placed a policeman," and a third, apparently an officer in rank, remarked: "The German armies have fallen asunder into two classes, masters and serfs, and the serfs have revolted." Everywhere there was bitterness against the militarism which was going to pieces. One heard accounts of harsh treatment by inexperienced young officers, of poor food, of terrible demands for service and sacrifice. There was talked a hope for an international revolution against a peace of violence. Some said, "The French soldiers will go along with us and then Old Hindenburg and Foch can fight it out between themselves."

So also in Berlin the sailors with whom I spoke told fables of red flags that had been raised by the English fleet. These young fellows sought by self-deception to gloss over the disintegration which the Revolution had loosed. Heart-breaking it was to hear numberless Alsations use vigorous German of the oldest Alamanian dialect to express sheer joy over the fact that they were to be freed from Germany. The sad result of forty years of German domination! Nowhere did I find upon this or upon the many other trips which I had to make during this and the next days, real bitterness against the princes. From the mild friendship of the Badener for his "Fritz" to the somewhat cynical but good-natured criticism of the Saxon, one found all stages. A Saxon remarked, "Our King couldn't stir a ripple on the tiniest water," to which another one replied, "You mean, probably, that the old fellow would not drink even a few drops of water." Other sentiments were heard. Some called the Revolution a Fool's Paradise, saying that those at

home who had never smelled powder now were trying to master the veteran fighters by soldier councils formed in the rear of the lines. There was some bitterness among the returned soldiers over the tearing off of iron crosses "through women and scamps."

As Hindenburg had declared as late as October that a continuation of the war until the following spring was possible, his change of opinion shows the catastrophic effect of the Revolution upon the army at the front, and above all, upon the officers. These conditions were accepted by from four to six men, "the Government of the Empire," without consulting the Reichstag or asking the army at the front, which technically would have been possible. I heard a few days later from one of the men best informed on matters of the Entente in Switzerland that the acceptance by the new government of these conditions which had been named for Wilhelm the Second was surprising, and that the *cupidité* in Paris and London was stimulated by this easy acceptance.

To sum up the present situation, the Anglo-Saxon world dominion is more firmly founded today than ever. The Pax Britannica encircles the earth as once the Pax Romana of the late imperial régime. So long as England declines disarmament on the sea the League of Nations will be for the weaker nations but a respectable form for sea dominion by England. In spite of the sacrifice of our best youth with an enormous dynamic achievement in technical and economic matters during the war, the peace of the sword hangs over us. We have won many laurels but unfortunately one cannot live on laurels.

The reasons for this situation can be indicated in a few words. The ultimate political decisions were entrusted to our military leaders who were limited to a provincial European outlook. They had no insight into world economics or world politics, and they had even less feeling and understanding for the power of human aspiration for freedom and democracy. They erred even in questions of material environment and at the end they collapsed as if without backbone.

BUT beyond the faults of the militarists, we Germans as a nation collapsed because during the last generation we carried on a policy of domination by force against the outside world without any policy of freedom at home. By doing this we made it possible for the commercial and revanche war of Western European capitalism and imperialism to develop into a world-wide war for human freedom, and thus to bring the world's conscience to the support of our enemies. Certainly even before the war the thought of freedom had not quite died in Germany, but it was weak as against the power of reaction because this thought of freedom had separated itself from the fruitful field of an idealistic and religious outlook upon life. In contrast, the Anglo-Saxon feeling for freedom, human dignity and manhood is rooted in the religious ground of Puritanism. The tap roots reach back and down through all the later overgrowth to this deeper source of inner strength. Our Pan-Germans and Social Democrats are drawing the waters of their spiritual life from shallower springs.

There exists a considerable difference between the German East of the Junkers and the German West and South. As soon as I visited the soldier councils in Frankfurt I felt surrounded by a more humane atmosphere and when I got back to Baden I found that conditions were practically unchanged by the Revolution. In the East militarism and junkerdom had rested like a mountain on the masses of people and had perpetuated the social stratification of feudalism. There in the East the Revolution was like a revolt of slaves. The intellectual classes sympathized with it and probably relying upon Wilson's Fourteen Points, underestimated the seriousness of our foreign position in their eagerness to welcome the new liberty. Only too soon it was proved that the revolting slave is like his former master. For every act of brutality and violence he returns brutality and violence when he gets into power. The extremes touch. The famous Herr von Oldenburg once wished to dissolve the Reichstag "with one good military captain and twelve soldiers," and the Independent Socialist, Hofmann, similarly suggested that he would get rid of the Reichstag with a few hand grenades of the red guard.

In Baden the Revolution took quite a different form. It was but an echo of what was going on elsewhere and it never would have happened excepting through the influence of what had occurred at Berlin. Once under way, it soon changed in Baden to the orderly progress of free men along the road that they had already been traveling. The Prince's House of Baden had fulfilled the purpose which Fichte said was the highest aim for any prince, namely, to educate to freedom and to make himself superfluous as ruler. Everything in Germany's future depends upon this one fact: Will a West German influence—Ebert, a child of Baden—succeed in Germanizing the East? Years ago I told my students in formulating our German inner political problems that everything depended upon making Berlin like Baden. I used to say to them that the best revenge for 1849 and Rastatt, when Prussian soldiers from Berlin choked our South German struggle for freedom would be to impose the political forms of Baden upon Berlin.

This contrast between the East and West is illuminated by the old words of Schiller: "Tremble before the slave bursting his chains, 'But fear not when the freeman takes a step forward.'"